Review
Reviewed Work(s): Waking Their Neighbors Up: The Nashville Agrarians Rediscovered by Thomas Daniel Young; A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians after Fifty Years by William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan; A Gallery of Southerners by Louis D. Rubin; The Republic of Letters in America: The Correspondence of John Peale Bishop and Allen Tate by Thomas Daniel Young, John J. Hindle, John Peale Bishop and Allen Tate
Review by: Richard Gray
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Thomas Daniel Young, *Waking Their Neighbors Up: The Nashville Agrarians Rediscovered* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1982, $8.50). Pp. xii, 90.

William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan (eds.), *A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1982, £9.10). Pp. x, 190.

Louis D. Rubin, Jr, *A Gallery of Southerners* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1982, £12.75). Pp. xxi, 233.

Thomas Daniel Young and John J. Hindle (eds.), *The Republic of Letters in America: The Correspondence of John Peale Bishop and Allen Tate* (Lexington, Ky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1981, £12.75). Pp. 232.

It is now more than fifty years since *I'll Take My Stand* was published. During that time the book, and the other writings of the Nashville Agrarians, have been the subject of continual controversy. Even before it was published, there were arguments about its nature and purposes, including strong disagreements over the title. 'I think the title is the God-damnest thing I ever heard of,' wrote Robert Penn Warren to Allen Tate, 'for the love of God block it if you can.' For Warren, as for Tate, the title (taken, of course, from the song 'Dixie') was far too specifically sectionalist in its connotations: their idea was something that suggested the culture of the Old South, certainly, but also that older European order which, as they saw it, the Old South had helped to perpetuate. Despite Warren's support and the strength of his own feelings, Tate did not manage to 'block it.' He did, however, have a note appended to his own essay, dissociating himself from what he discreetly termed the title's 'exclusiveness.' More important, by raising the issue at all he and Warren did expose some fairly fundamental differences of opinion among the 'Twelve Southerners' (as they described themselves on the title-page) and some fairly basic contradictions in their argument.

Quite apart from the split over the title, between what might loosely be termed the sectionalists and the traditionalists, there was the more elementary question for the book's purpose. Was it a program for action or a piece of mythmaking? Did *I'll Take My Stand* offer, as Donald Davidson and Andrew Nelson Lytle believed an alternative economic and social strategy? Or was it rather that, as Warren, Tate and John Crowe Ransom tended to feel, the origins and possibilities of the book were principally fictive? Even supposing that such questions were or are answerable (and they are not, I think), there was the further problem of the actual texture of life in the Agrarians' paradise. There is, finally, very little connection between the simple, self-sufficient farm world celebrated in some of the essays – Lytle's, for example – and the leisurely experience of the plantation described in several others. Lytle, among other contributors, eventually took this further by insisting that farm and plantation were not only different but utterly inimical; for the planter, he argued, was 'the agent of those disrupting forces... at work since the sixteenth century' that helped destroy the Old South and its essentially folk culture. In retrospect, it seems hardly surprising that the Agrarians went off on such different paths in later life – towards, for example, liberalism and McCarthyism, Catholicism and pragmatism, teaching and farming, the New Deal and the New Criticism. Already, in *I'll Take My Stand* the signposts are there, pointing in opposite directions.

So what, the obvious question is, holds the book together, or at any rate stops complete confusion from setting in? Thomas Daniel Young suggests one important factor, in his characteristically lively and informative book, *Waking Their Neighbours Up:* it is, as he nicely puts it, the Agrarians' 'rhetorical mode,' their use of idioms derived from the Southern tradition. Such idioms, Young indicates, help to anchor *I'll Take My Stand* in a specific time and place and, in

doing so, help to verify its Southern credentials. This is not, as I see it, simply a matter of using language to paper over the ideological cracks (although it would be disingenuous to pretend that this is not *sometimes* the case). It is, in addition and much more importantly, a matter of using words and images to articulate what Tate called the region's 'great idea': that mixture of beliefs, theories, and superstitions which the Southern writer inherits and against which he tests himself and (to quote Tate again) 'his sense of the natural world.' Quite simply, *I'll Take My Stand* is central to the Southern tradition and its literary 'renaissance' because it explains what most Southern writing tends merely to invoke, question or commemorate; in its internal conflicts as well as its attempts at coherence, its idiom and its arguments, it lays bare for us an entire structure of feeling.

There are two integrally related points: *I'll Take My Stand* is a deeply Southern book, and a good part of its Southernness derives from its inner violence, the contradictions and repressed fears that often ruffle the equable surfaces of its prose. The Agrarians are, in effect, Southern in their belief in a pastoral Golden Age, and equally in their frequently stated conviction that 'there is evil in the world and it is strong'; in their grandiloquence and also in their guilt; in their exaggeratedly heroic manner and, too, in their repressed knowledge of slavery; and not least, finally, in their obsession with a past that is being re-imagined, re-invented even while it is being remembered. Such points are worth emphasizing and repeating, I think, because there now seems to be a tendency to minimize this regional dimension, and the darker, more demonic underside of both the Agrarian argument and the Southern mind: a tendency that is neatly illustrated by *A Band of Prophets*, a book of essays which grew out of a conference held at Vanderbilt University in 1980. *I'll Take My Stand*, we are told by most of the contributors to the conference, represents 'an affirmation of human values' couched in terms of the literary pastoral; its antecedents are to be found in such works as *The Deserted Village* and *Walden*, and its prophetic accuracy has been underlined by the foreign and domestic policy failures of the past two decades, such as 'environmental depredation, stagflation, urban decay.' Only rarely is there any acknowledgement that the Agrarian symposium is rather more than a pastoral, and something other than a contribution to the ecological case, and that what separates the Agrarians from other American celebrants of the land is probably more important than what unites them.

It is difficult to locate precisely the reasons for this shift of critical opinion: but it is nevertheless there – and illustrated in a rather more general fashion by *A Gallery of Southerners*. Rubin is not specifically concerned with the Agrarians (although his book does contain an essay on Tate and includes many references to people like Warren and Ransom). Nevertheless, he betrays the same tendency shown by the contributors to *A Band of Prophets* to accommodate Agrarian and Southern writing to the mainstream of American literature and its traditions of humane, liberal individualism. This is not entirely misconceived, of course; the Agrarians were humanists of a sort and most Southern writers have taken their stand on the side of the individual. But to emphasize this, or still worse to dwell on it almost to the exclusion of everything else, is to blur the focus, to underestimate the peculiarity and power of the Southern experience and the sheer strangeness, the eccentricity of most books from below the Mason and Dixon line.

There is a fierce resistance among Southern writers not only to the norms of American society (something, after all, that they share with most other American writers), but also to most of the familiar shibboleths of the American intellectual and literary traditions. This is patently clear when one reads *The Republic of Letters*, a beautifully edited edition of the correspondence between Tate and John Peale Bishop. Again and again, one is struck by the two writers' fierce sense of apartness, their devotion to principles which they realize other American writers will probably regard as aberrant, their utter determination to deny the most elemental of national dreams. 'The older I get,' writes Tate in one of his letters,

> the more I realize that I set out about ten years ago to live a life of failure, to imitate, in my own life, the history of my people. . . . The significance of the Southern way of life, in my time, is failure: those Southerners who leave their culture – and it is abandoned most fully by those who live at home – and succeed in some not too critical meaning of success, sacrifice some great part of their deepest heritage.

This is not, I think, mere romantic posturing. It represents an attempt on Tate's part to identify himself with a crucial and particularly idiosyncratic part of his tradition. It can hardly be appreciated by critics, like Rubin, who have become part of the mainstream, a conspicuously successful literary establishment, and who seem intent on absorbing the writers they discuss into that establishment too. But that is the critics' loss, not the writers'. People like Bishop and Tate (and Tate's fellow Agrarians) were, as they knew, stubbornly different in their guilt as well as their pride, their inherited burdens as well as their aims: which is to say, really, that they were Southern.

University of Essex RICHARD GRAY